

SEARCHING INDIVIDUALITY: IBSEN'S NORA AND TAGORE'S MRINAL BOTH ARE EQUAL

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ABSTRACT

"The Wife's Letter" or "StreerPatra" and "A Doll's House" are two famous, well-known names to those who love literature. The first one is a short story by Rabindranath Tagore, the only Indian to get Noble Prize for Literature, is mainly acclaimed as a poet but widely regarded as the inventor of the modern Bengali short story. The second one is a drama by Henrik Ibsen, perhaps the most powerful and influential dramatist of modern times. Both these writers are from a different culture and social context but their thinking and concept presented in many of their writings are very closely related. They have different issues in their writings to talk but the common one which the paper is going to discuss about, is the liberation of the individual from the shackles and restraints of custom and conventions through the characters Mrinal from "The Wife's Letter" and Nora from "A Doll's House".

KEYWORDS: Tagore, Ibsen, Liberation, Individuality, Identity & Patriarchy

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INTRODUCTION

Ibsen and Tagore from a different culture and social context but their thinking and concept about social problem especially about women have many similarities. Ibsen as a writer of Norway is talking about European women and Tagore is talking about Indian Bengali women. In "A Doll's House" Ibsen presented the patriarchal ideal which was supported and reinforced by a social structure wherein women had little overt political or economic power, wherein they were economically, socially and psychologically dependent on men especially on the institution of marriage and motherhood. Through Nora's character, Ibsen expands his outlook on the women's position whose individuality and freedom are taken by patriarchal society. Also, he has presented how Nora protested against this situation. As in "The Wife's Letter" Tagore presented women's position through three female characters (BoroBou, MejoBou, Bindu) and like Nora through Mrinal's (MejoBou-wife of the second son) character, he protested against this situation. Both Tagore and Ibsen through Mrinal and Nora's character presented women's love for self-identity and their feelings in the importance of individuality.

Authors in Brief

Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) the most influential dramatist referred as the father of modern realistic drama. He is famous not only for his plays and poems but also for his deep philosophical and revolutionary ideas, which had an undeniable impact on the development of literature in general and drama in particular throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Ibsen developed the problem plays or drama of ideas. The problem of Ibsen's social drama is consistent through all his works. In "A Doll's House", he especially probed the social problem of the passively assigned to women in a male-oriented society and also, he concerned with the problem of women's

position in society.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) the greatest poet, philosopher, artist regarded as the inventor of the modern Bengali short story. He has written nearly one hundred short stories where he has portrayed women in varied ways. He was fully aware of women's role in the society. Almost all his female characters were plotted in the traditional plot but were yet very strong. He found in the women of his country an immense wealth-their courage against all odds, the power of survival under the worst possible conditions and oppression, the forbearance, their self-sacrifice, and gentleness. Through his stories, he pointed the feudal customs which enhanced the miseries of women and he believed in the progress of women and their emancipation from feudal bondage. As In "The Wife's Letter" Tagore expressed a women's plight and resentment with the way her life unravels. In this story, through Mrinal's voice, Tagore brings up the sociopolitical trope of a woman's place in social formations, as in the institutions of marriage and family.

DISCUSSIONS

"*StreerPatra*" or "*The Wife's Letter*" is an epistolary important short story by Tagore, expressing a woman's plight and resentment with the way her life unravels. The plot revolves around Mrinal, who is married to an upper-class, patriarchal zamindar household. Mrinal is an extraordinarily beautiful and intelligent twelve years old village girl, while praised for her beauty is expected to hide her intelligence. Mrinal is mocked for her rustic nature but at the same time, her in law's family is highly aware of her sharp brains. As Mrinal says in her letter:

"It did not take long for you to forget that I had beauty-but you were forced to remember at every step that I had brains. This intelligence is so much a part of my nature that it has survived even fifteen years in your household." (chaudhuri 2000: 207)

Even no one knows that she writes poetry in secret to keep her creative fires alright. She says in her letter: "I had something that was beyond the precincts of your domestic drill. I used to write poetry secretly. Never mind if it was all nonsense... that was my freedom. There I could be myself... That I am a Poet, that's something you could not discover in the past fifteen years." (Ibid., p.638) In this story, we get three women and all represented by the signatory of the explosive letter, Mrinal. In her letter, she not only presented her own married life of fifteen years but also the position of her elder sister-in-law and her young sister Bindu. She starts the letter with the traditional reverential address "your Revered Lotus feet" or "Sricharankamaleshu" but ends with supreme self-assurance as Mrinal signs off with the subscription "Tomadercharantalasroychinno" or "free from the shelter beneath your feet, Mrinal". By signing her own name rather than the descriptive chronological nomenclature attributed to her as "MejoBou", that she is wife of the second son, Mrinal is reborn as herself. The concluding line of Mrinal's letter discovered her identity and she becomes Mrinal from MejoBou- "I too will be saved. I am saved." (ebook-20.11.17)

Apart from Mrinal the other daughter-in-law, the eldest one (BoroBou), who was neither beautiful nor rich. She married into the family only because of her blue-blood. So, she was always conscious of her lack of assets-wealth and beauty. When her unmarried fourteen-year-old sister come to live with her after her father's death, she falls in great problem. She tries to prove Bindu not an economic burden by forcing her to do all the strenuous household work. Mrinal's own daughter died soon after birth, so her longing for a child was somewhat compensated by the arrival of Bindu. Mrinal became Bindu's surrogate mother, even Mrinal started fighting for Bindu with the rest of the family. However, patriarchy dictates that Bindu is to be married off but on the very second day of her marriage she discovered her husband was mad

and violent. Terrified of her husband Bindu run away from her in-law's house within three days of her wedding but she has to go back because of the patriarchal norms. Mrinal's Desperate attempt to rescue Bindu also failed. Lastly, Bindu had committed suicide by setting herself on fire. At this suicidal news, Mrinal says-

"Oh. Peace at last. People heard about it and were enraged. They said, it's become a kind of fashion for women to set fire to their clothes and kill themselves. You all said, Such dramatics! Maybe. But shouldn't we ask why the dramatics take place only with Bengali women's sarees and not with the so-brave Bengali men's dhotis?" (ebook-20.11.17)

All the three women Mrinal, BoroBou and Bindu are loveless in life. Their husbands provide them shelter, security, and sustenance. There were no possibilities of equal partnership in this relationship between power and powerlessness. As Mrinal says in her letter:

"I did not suffer in your household as suffering is commonly understood. In your house, there is no lack of food or clothes...but I will never again return to your house...I have seen Bindu. I have learned what it means to be a woman in this domestic world. I need no more of it." (Chaudhuri 2000:217) In the case of Bindu and Mrinal, there has been resistance to the appropriation of their power. Bindu commits suicide while Mrinal leaves in order to live. Mrinal's in-law's house which was well decorated from outside, was fully unhygienic from the inside, which was actually the staying place for women. So, for women in that house, there was no love and care. Even there was no open place for breathing freely. As at the beginning of story, the description of the house through Mrinal's letter is like this-

"There is a small garden at the front of the house, and the outer rooms do not lack for furniture of decoration. The inner rooms are like the reverse of an embroidered pattern; on the inside, there is no hiding the starkness, no grace, no adornment. On the inside the lights glimmer darkly, the breeze enters like a thief, the refuse never leaves the courtyard. The blemishes on the walls and floors are conspicuous and ineradicable." (parabaas-20.11.17)

So Mrinal who grown up fully in the open air, under the blue sky is now in a dungeon-like an in-law's house. But when she left home for a pilgrimage in Puri after Bindu's death she got chance again to enjoy full freedom. She is saying in her letter:

"Oh Mejo-Bou, you have nothing to fear! It doesn't take a moment to slough off a Mejo-Bou's shell. I am not scared of your street any longer. In front of me, today is the blue ocean, over my head a mass of monsoon cumulonimbus." (ebook-20.11.17) Now she has the courage to announce that she will not return to her husband's house, which never became a home for her, though she lived there for fifteen years. She says: "But I shall not return to 27 Makhani Baral Lane ever again.....I don't want to go through it anymore." (ebook-20.11.17) Mrinal's literacy, intelligence and fifteen years' experience of her married life gave her the courage of thinking of her freedom which was absent in her husband's house. So, Mrinal's acute observation, her astuteness, her independent spirit is scripted in each line of her letter which rejects the oppressive and callous citadel of patriarchy and helps her to prove her individuality.

"A Doll's House" demonstrates the importance of social class in late-19th century Norway. The main characters in the play pretend to be someone who others would like them to be, instead of being their true selves. As, Nora's first impression on the audience is an obedient, money-loving, childish wife but unknowingly a strong, independent woman. At the beginning of the drama, Nora seems to just want money from her husband, Torvald. Even when her husband asked what she would like for Christmas, money is her answer. Torvald always addresses Nora as she is just a little girl or even a pet. As Torvald says: "My little lark must not droop her wings like that. What? Is my squirrel in the skulls?" (Ibsen, p25)

This is how Ibsen presented Nora, who is not an equal partner in marriage with Torvald. With the progress of the play it becomes clear that due to a sickness Torvald had in the past, Nora was forced to take a loan from a rich man known as Mr. Krogstad, in order to pay for a trip needed to save Torvald's life. But about borrowing or making loan Torvald's opinion presented at the very beginning of the drama, "No debts! No, borrow! There's always something inhabited, something unpleasant, about a home built on credit and borrowed money." (Ibsen, p25) But Nora got the loan behind Torvald's back and also, she has to forge a signature so that she can get the loan to save Torvald's life, because women at that time were unable to make the loan without the consent of men. Through this, we find what Nora is pretending as a money-loving is not actually rather she is a determined and willing individual who can do whatever it is necessary for the situation. As Nora knew about Torvald's abhorrence towards debt and dishonesty so she wants to hide it from him. Though she didn't spend the money for her own entertainment but till she didn't ask for help from her husband rather she wants to pay back the loan by herself by saving her pocket money and secretly by copying books. This shows bravery, determination and willpower in Nora's character which is all very admirable features.

Finally, when Torvald finds about Nora's debt and forgery, he becomes angry on Nora. Torvald said: "Wretched woman. What is this you have done?..... Do you understand what you have done?" (Ibsen, p153-155) Nora answered: "yes, now I'm beginning to understand." (Ibsen, p156) Torvald also complained that he has passed eight years with a lady who is a criminal, who has got all these from her father. "No religion, no sense of duty.....I'm done for a miserable failure, and it's all the fault of a father-brained woman." (Ibsen, p154) Even Torvald warned her not to bring up her children, because he doesn't believe her. All these things changed when he has got the second note from Mr. Krogstad, where he sends his regrets and apologies for what he has done. But in the meantime, it becomes clear to Nora that she has been nothing more than a means of entertainment to her husband. Nora Said:

"You have never understood me..... I have been greatly wronged, Torvald. Firstly, by my father, and then by you..... You two never loved me..... At home daddy used to tell me what he thought, then I thought the same.... He used to call me his baby doll, and he played with me as I used to play with my dolls." (Ibsen, p162-163)

Nora understands woman to be passive and have no individual opinion. As she says: 'Our house has never been anything but a playroom. Here I have been your doll wife as at home I was daddy's doll child.' (Ibsen, p164) Nora becomes the victim of the patriarchal society where women are never thought of an independent individual. Where they are thought as mothers, wives and daughters. But Nora is thinking about her liberation "I must take the step to educate myself..... Something I must do on my own." (Ibsen, p166) So, she decides to leave her husband and children to discover her real life. Torvald tried to convince her in the name of social rules but now Nora is very confident, conscious and changed and now she can think about her own duties and responsibilities. She says: "I believe that first and foremost I am an individual, just as much as you are..... I must try to discover who is right, society or me." (Ibsen, p167-169)

Nora was in a dream that whenever the secret will be disclosed Torvald will come forward to save her because he loves her and she has done everything for saving Torvald's life. But Torvald's outburst grows her self-awakening. Her long expected miracle never took place because of Torvald's selfish character even Torvald says no man would sacrifice his honor for his criminal wife. But Nora replies: "Millions of women have done so." (Ibsen, p172) Finally, she understands women's plight in patriarchy and her position in Torvald's life and all these things helps her to think herself as a human being. So, the first part of the drama presents Nora as a beautiful, doll wife to her husband, and in the second part with the exposure of the secret she has lost her husband, children, social status, and security but she gained her freedom as an

individual human being.

CONCLUSIONS

Both Mrinal and Nora in the early part of the story were very loyal, responsible and sacrificing to the society, family, and husbands. From their family, none of them have got any physical torture. But day by day they started to understand their position in their family. Even after passing eight years together Nora mentioned her husband as a strange man because none of them have the clear idea about each other. In the same way, Mrinal after passing fifteen years together, decides to go for a pilgrimage and not to return to her husband's house anymore which never becomes home for her. She says she doesn't want to go through it anymore. So, we find the late nineteenth century's English women and early twentieth century's Indian women both are in the same position that is living in the shadow of men. As Hagemann says: "A woman's main responsibility centered around being a housewife, whose most prominent task was to serve her husband and children (417-419). Both Mrinal and Nora behave very differently at the last end of the story. They leave their husbands and invite loneliness and insecurity in the outer world where both of them want to know themselves and prove themselves. Nora wants to discover herself and Mrinal wants to enjoy her life through her own way, she says, "I too will live. I am safe now." (1) So, the outer insecure life is now more secured to them than their husband's house because now they have the mental power and courage to face the outer world to find and prove their individuality.

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